

# The modern tradition of the *Current History*

## Present History First Networking Session

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*"I have no expectation that any man will read history aright who thinks that what was done in a remote age, by men whose names have resounded far, has any deeper sense than what he is doing today."* R. W. Emerson (1803-1882)

### The idea of current and the present "roots"

A simple definition of the word "current" tells about what is happening or existing now, belonging to the present time, aware of what is happening in a particular area of human activity... But Current is too related to the events of his own time a man is recording to, just to fix a present -the differences between now and then- or to create a past.

Does Current Events make history? Is it possible a history out of Current Events? What does it mean Current Events in a historical perspective?... These are the kind of question that historians and philosophers are used to discuss. Two great achieves of Current Era thinking are the certainty that the passage of time do not clean history, and that the true is not superior because of the passing of the time. Even more, past is not always certitude as present does not mean always unconvincing feelings. And the passing of time do no safeguard Historians, each one concerned by his own worries. The advantage of past on present is the lack of survivors to reject or change historians version and fables are, of course, the matter of most reconstructions of the pass time. So, as many historians see His-

tory as some kind of fiction, may be “true” rests just in the current history. Being necessarily, every history cannot avoid its “present” (not pass) root. But, as living people are the agents of current history, the responsible of historians cannot fail<sup>1</sup>.

The idea of the current event is a classical topic in historiographical arguments, and contemporary people feels current events can be said just as breaking news. They do not understand the events as a nuclear part in the “flux” of History. Nevertheless current events –as factual ones- happens only in a historical context. Today, public current events are communicated as a chronicle, as a report in which they are not linked at all. Obviously, Current History may not be seen as a Chronicle: a historical account of events arranged in order of time, without any analysis or interpretation. Chronicles are crucial sources to compose History, as historians discern, important tools to compile and write history.

From ancient papers to new social webs, advices, reading problem pages or public discussions about social matters permit historians understand how societies evolve. In nineties, journalists as Marx and Engels wrote their essays to the *New York Tribune*, trying to offer an interpretation of the history *on course*. Nowadays, in Internet, the reader/writers posts their current problems to other ones suggest solutions. In historical context, researching and teaching current events provides a particular trial in the experiences. In a World History, current World stories are building a Current History, organized in several topics: civics, politics, economics, geography, psychology... So that, “current context” helps researchers to understand what is going on by putting current events in their appropriate historical context. And that, even if the available sources do not provide the long-term historical view, necessary for us to understand why an event unfolds the way it does, and how it relates to their history class.

The approaches to the Current History are not the ones used in the historiographic archetypes. As there is not a distance to contemplate de history, the historian has to implicate his view in the current events that are chosen to be studied. The question keeps on being if Currency may be the substance of some kind of History

### **Creating a tradition and writing Current History**

A high reputed publication, *Current History*, is said to be a magazine recording “history in the making”. The magazine *Current History* was founded in 1914 by George Washington Ochs Oakes in order to provide detailed coverage of World

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<sup>1</sup> Gorman (2004); Banner (2012)

War I. So, it is the oldest United States-based publication totally dedicated to contemporary and current world affairs. *Current History* is a monthly private magazine based in Philadelphia that owns to Redmond family since 1942 till today. It has no public affiliation –governmental or institutional– at all, and the issues in *Current History* are organized following world regions criteria and wide-ranging themes *on course* such as Governance, Globalization, or Climate Change. In 1939, the magazine was linked to the run-up to World War II. *Current History* had been sold to a tenure group that included Joseph Hilton Smyth. Thought Smyth's rights on *Current History* ended the same year, he was later convicted of acting as agents for the Japanese government without registering with the State Department<sup>2</sup>. He faced sentences of ten year imprisonment and \$10.000 fine, admitting to have published *The living Age* (1938 to 1941) with Japanese funds. Surprisingly, *Current History* –the magazine– came part of Current History –the events. So that the magazine in 1942 had to make public that Smyth did not control any editorial policy during the short time he held the possession of the publication<sup>3</sup>.

The immediate history may be written as the experiences are happening, at the same time the characters of history are acting. The responsibility is great. In every academy it has been widely discussed the so-called "management of news" because their importance to the current history or the future one. The point is: when do current affairs become history, and what are the obligations of those who propose to write that history, besides those who make it? Every nation or country might have a controversy *apropos* this point.

The European scholarship in the nineteenth century had contributed to build a high wall between present and past. History occurred not least than two or three generations before the present and current events. What newspapers said was not history at all. Historians separated the two times, considering present as an important daytime, suitable for papers, opposite to the past whose status increased because of the Imperials ambitions. Historians accepted as true that history –not present– writings contributed to educate the mind. Those days, historians needed a legitimated academic place and they erected a big one. Historians contributed History to become a significant structure of contemporary knowledge, into the service of empires and nations. Nowadays only the most rigid academics make objection to endeavors to relate the immediate past, even more when the degree of historical change accelerates and that the present becomes the past more quickly than previously.

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<sup>2</sup> See: "Three Unregistered Agents for Japan Enter Guilty Press", *The Evening Independent*, November 2, 1942

<sup>3</sup> See explanations in *Current History*, October 1942, 137–138

In the 21st, the point is why postmodern societies do not accept a history that is not completely “death”. One may ask what kind of historiography or citizenship appreciate and welcome a “living history”, but this history is, as it happens in any epoch, a tool used by societies and powers. In Democracies there is not only the right to be or act, but the one to know what is going on under criticism and intellectual points of view. Public problems and policies have to be participated to people, and historians cannot be irresponsible in this matter, because of the old tradition of the “truth”.

The task in Current history shows colossal because of the varieties of sources one may find and follow. Historians have to decide and choose the source to the historic goal among all the available information. Surely, interviews are tools that generate huge information to the current history. In democratic countries, National Archives are open to the researchers and usually it might not be difficult to accede to papers and files not much time ago were close and forbidden to people. The interview as a source to write history of the present is not new. One of the first scholar projects of the Oral History in the US was the John F. Kennedy Library one in Columbia University, to the Presidential history of the first half of the XXth Century. Another one, “[The Voices of the Manhattan Project](#)” is a joint project by the *Atomic Heritage Foundation* and the *Los Alamos Historical Society* to create a public archive of oral history collections of Manhattan Project veterans and their families.

### **The “now” impression. From Present Time to contra-passato**

As every human being in this current era feels part of the history, the consciousness of contemporaneity has increased. It has been amplified the perception of bringing together by the networks of global communication, information, and transportation. The infatuation of a “now” impression is killing any interest about past and future. In this kind of vision there is no place for the non-contemporary experiences. In the Current and Global Era contemporaries do not recognize the non ones<sup>4</sup>. But, even in a contemporary world, there are societies that do not participate in the contemporary global history, or they are not seen as “contemporaneous” but as pre contemporaries<sup>5</sup>. So, one may think that Current Era may not consider an only type of contemporary history. What historians are watching at is a very complex scene in which contemporaneous is not contemporarily at all. From nineties to nowadays<sup>6</sup> historians have tested that virtually in communica-

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<sup>4</sup> Sachenmaier (2011)

<sup>5</sup> Huguet (2012)

<sup>6</sup> Ash (2000)

tions<sup>7</sup>, thought a crucial historical change, did not suppressed the earthly and non-global acts.

What about the perception of current events, or the Present time in which they occur? The emphasis of this Global Present Time increases in addition of all the memories (fair or false) and because of the brief expectations of the future. As in every other time, from nineties to nowadays, the struggle for and against globalization stimulates historians to conform utopian and dystopian discourses. But, Global History<sup>8</sup> does not mean to talk about *everything* –past, present and future. Not even to renew the World History. Many historians may see Global History as History of a Global Age, concentrating on history in the Present time, or searching for global issues in the nearest experiences on current time. As current events have roots, these global ones may be followed from present to past.

Twenty years ago, Martin Albrow, a research professor at Roehampton Institute, London, published *The Global Age*<sup>9</sup>, a book defending an epochal change from the modern era to a new era of globally. The point of this new global era was the scale of human activities –global- in a continuous present time. But what is the most skillful academic discipline to study the history of the Global Era? As there is not a fair epistemic definition –a non-classic one-, you may understand that Global History is “interdisciplinary”. But “interdisciplinary” does not mean anything at all. What we really know about this academic problem is what Global history is not. It is not only history nor geography, not only a sociological and political matter, or an international one. Technology -communication, environments- represents a crucial point in the Global Era studies, as it happened with the first Industrial Era studies. And do not forget the great impact of every cultural sight –global or local- in this global current history<sup>10</sup>.

Finally, may current history be asked as a “what-if”? That is not new, as it can be remembered the function of historical fiction in the 19<sup>th</sup>: to show readers the possibility and reality of historical change. Historical novelists have inserted fictional characters and stories into known events while leaving intact the global shapes of history. The Counterfactual Narratives have been backed in academic meetings<sup>11</sup> and historians make serious efforts to think about the contingencies of history with alternative histories and alternative history fiction can look a lot

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<sup>7</sup> Comor (1994)

<sup>8</sup> Hunt, (2014)

<sup>9</sup> Albrow (1996), Albrow & King (1990)

<sup>10</sup> Robertson (1995)

<sup>11</sup> University of Liverpool, *Alternative History and Counterfactual Narratives conference*, April, 2015.

like standard historical fiction, but with a twist<sup>12</sup>. For example, the novel *Past Conditional: A Retrospective Hypothesis* (1975, translated 1989), by Italian novelist Guido Morselli shows a world in which the impasse of the IWW is broken (1916) by an Austrian force that uses a secret tunnel under the Alps to launch a surprise invasion of northern Italy and penetrate into southern France. Morselli engages directly with contingency, picturing the processes of change<sup>13</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> Tetlock, Lebow, and Parker (2006); Abbott (2016)

<sup>13</sup> Kathleen Singles: *Alternate History: Playing with Contingency and Necessity*, Berlín/Boston, Walter de Gruyter GmbH, 2013, 58-72.; Richard Evans, *Altered Pasts: Counterfactuals in History*, London, Little Brown, 2014.

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